

Musikfest Berlin, Part 1: The Opening Weekend

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Berlin, 31/08/2013. Philharmonie. [31 August] Anne-Sophie Mutter, violin. Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Manfred Honeck, conductor. Janacek: *Suite for String Orchestra*. Lutosławski: *Chain 2*. Richard Strauss: *Ein Heldenleben*. [1 September] Lorenza Borrani, violin. Romain Guyot, clarinet. Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano. Chamber Orchestra of Europe. Bartok: *Kontraste for Violin, Clarinet and Piano*.

Janacek: *Concertino for Piano and Chamber Orchestra*. Ligeti: *Kammerkonzert for 13 instrumentalists*. Mozart: *Piano Concerto in G major, K. 453*. Musikfest Berlin 2013

Berlin's annual Musikfest- a three week celebration of orchestral and chamber music organised around a central theme- is one of the surest signs that a new season has arrived. Over the course of some twenty concerts, audiences are given the opportunity to hear all of the major Berlin orchestras, in addition to an enviable selection of top soloists, ensembles and orchestras from around the world. If Musikfest is neither as long nor as wide-ranging as, for instance, the Proms or Salzburg, it more than earns its place in the pantheon of great European festivals by virtue of its high-calibre artists and its consistently inventive programming. It is the sort of festival where each night not only offers the promise of peerless musicianship, but also of new discovery; you may go to hear a piece of music you like, but you will almost certainly come away having been amazed by some piece you'd previously never even thought about.

This year's festival- expertly curated and organised by the Berliner Festspiele- chose, as its point of departure, three composers from three different Eastern European countries, each of whom inherited and transformed the legacy of nineteenth-century music in a unique and radical way. Those three composers- Janacek, Bartok, and Lutosławski- figure prominently within each of the programmes, but this basic palette has been broadened considerably with the addition of works by similarly individual composers Britten and Shostakovich, as well as works from the nineteenth- and even eighteenth century which complement the more modern pieces in unexpected ways. And while the two concerts that made up the festival's opening weekend may have featured some undeniable staples of the classical repertoire- Strauss' *Heldenleben* and Mozart's *G major piano concerto*- the greatest revelations on each evening came precisely from those composers whom the curators had intended to high light.

The opening night concert was performed by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Manfred Honeck, who set the proceedings in motion with Janacek's delightful *Suite for String Orchestra*. This youthful work, written when the composer was only 23, may have been relatively obscure even to those familiar with his later orchestral and operatic output; however it was no mere imitation of the prevailing romanticism of the late nineteenth-century. Rather, its six movements were possessed of great rhythmic invention and an approach to melody that may well have prefigured the composer's later folkloric activities. It was certainly given a spirited performance by the Pittsburgh strings, who remained attuned to both the energy and the nuance of the piece. The first Adagio and the two Andante movements were especially lovely.

The highlight of the evening, however, was Lutosławski's *Chain 2*, subtitled a 'dialogue for violin and orchestra'. On this evening, the demanding violin part was handled by none other than Anne-Sophie Mutter, who premiered the piece some twenty-five years ago and has clearly maintained a special relationship with it ever since. During the course of the work, the violin is pitted against a series of sonic events drawn from Lutosławski's extensive playbook of orchestral technique. The orchestra demonstrated that they were more than up to the challenges of the score, delivering a finely shaded and firmly controlled counterbalance to the excursions of the violin. It was an exhilarating performance of this unique work as one might hope to hear.

After the exquisite detail of *Chain 2* and the chamber strings of Janacek's suite, Strauss' symphonically scaled *Ein Heldenleben*- the score of which calls for some nine horns, two harps and an arsenal of percussionists- seemed almost disorientingly maximalist. Herr Honeck took the opening sections at a very brisk pace; it was, perhaps, too brisk for some tastes, although it did have the pleasing effect of

making the woodwind outbursts in the second section- designed by Strauss to represent the sniping chatter of his early critics- sound positively malevolent.

Much like the earlier Lutosławski piece, the third section of *Helden/eben* could reasonably be described as a dialogue for violin and orchestra; the lengthy *obbligato* passage is perhaps one of the most technically challenging that Strauss ever composed and, on this evening, the accelerated tempo must have rendered it especially difficult. The concertmaster, however, navigated the passage with great agility, leading to a wonderful moment of serenity at the end of the section. Soon the frenetic pace returned, and the fourth section- although undeniably exciting- seemed a touch muddy in its victorious climaxes and always seemed slightly overpowered by the horns.

Despite these reservations, it had to that point been a thoroughly enjoyable *Helden/eben*. However it was not until the valedictory final sections- in which Strauss quotes in extensio from his previous works while preparing for his imagined withdrawal from the world- that Honeck's interpretation began to approach greatness. With the brisk pace of the first movements firmly in the past, the 'Hero's Works of Peace' section was infused with a grand lyricism, while the piece's final moments were elevated by playing of marvellous depth on the part of the brass. It was a stunning conclusion, and the heartfelt applause was met with an encore consisting of an arrangement of a Schubert song, followed by the Baron's comeuppance waltz from Act 111 of *Rosenkavalier*.

The Sunday night concert offered music on an altogether different scale. The Chamber Orchestra of Europe, under the direction of master pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard, presented an intriguing programme that began with a trio and continued to amplify resources until, in the final piece of the evening, the whole orchestra was present on stage; and much like the evening before, the programme placed its modern works at the fore, but resorted to an established masterwork that was given new context by the modernity that preceded it.

On this evening, the opening piece may also have been the highlight. Bartok's *Kontraste*- scored for clarinet, violin and piano- proved to be something of a minor masterpiece and a source of no small delight over the course of its relatively brief running time. When the piece was first performed in 1940, the clarinet part was performed by jazz great Benny Goodman; however, any overt jazz influence that the piece may have possessed was subsumed into a larger design that took its distinctly interwar sonic palette into uncharted (although consistently rewarding) territory.

If the piece sounded just as da ring in 2013, it was due in no small part to the extraordinary chemistry between the three players. Herr Aimard, whose devotion to the twentieth-century piano repertoire is beyond reproach, found an ideal match in the fluid clarinet of Romain Guyot and the utterly captivating violin playing of Lorenza Borrani. Between the three of them, they managed to present the full spectrum of Bartok's complex rhythms and serpentine figures with no shortage of elegance and style.

After the trio introduction, the forces swelled to seven musicians for Janacek's *Concertino* for piano and chamber orchestra. While the piece was nominally scored for an unusual ensemble consisting of two violins and a viola, plus a horn, clarinet and bassoon, the first movement was primarily a dialogue for horn and piano, while the second featured almost exclusively piano and bassoon. Only during the two final movements did all the instruments start to get involved and, even then, the piece remained notable for its economy of resources.

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